

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Congressman Sam Farr (D-Carmel) on Wednesday introduced legislation aimed at increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables in school breakfasts and lunches. The bill includes several strategies that will improve health and limit obesity among America's schoolchildren.

Provisions included in the Children's Fruit and Vegetable Act, H.R. 4333:

- USDA will implement a plan to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables purchased for school feeding programs.
- USDA will work with schools to encourage the use of salad bars in school cafeterias, a proven strategy for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption (\$10 million/year for two years).
- Improve overall cafeteria quality and feeding infrastructure (\$100 million one-time payment)
- Promote farm-to-cafeteria programs (\$10 million/year for five years)
- Provide schools with training and technical assistance (\$500,000/year for five years)

Increasing fruits, vegetables in schools

One of the key provisions in the Children's Fruit and Vegetable Act (H.R. 4333) instructs the U.S. Department of Agriculture to implement a plan that will remove barriers to the purchase and distribution of perishable fruits and vegetables within school feeding programs.

"USDA spends more than \$10 billion a year on school feeding programs, but only a small fraction goes to fruits and vegetables," Rep. Farr said following introduction of the bill. "The federal government talks about the food pyramid and health eating, then spends billions on unhealthy food. It's time we put our money where our mouth is and address the poor quality of food in our schools."

Rep. Adam Putnam (R-Fla.), the legislation's lead Republican cosponsor, added: "Trying to get kids to eat their vegetables may seem like an old problem, but we have only to look at the level of childhood obesity which has tripled in America during the last 20 years to know that healthy eating habits are in decline. In addition, the federal government's investment in nutrition

programs must be revised to reflect modern health standards. Particularly among needy students, school programs often provide the primary opportunity for consumption of nutritionally valuable foods. The tools provided under this bill will result in school meals that not only appeal to students but also better meet students' nutritional needs."

Salad bars

The bill instructs USDA to put in place a plan to promote the use of salad bars in schools. The legislation authorizes \$10 million for fiscal years 2011 and 2012 to help schools purchase salad bars and fruit and vegetable bars for their cafeterias.

A study illustrating the benefits of salad bars in schools was conducted by Dr. Wendy Slusser, director of UCLA's Fit for Health Program, and Harvinder Sareen, Director of Clinical Programs at WellPoint, a health benefits company.

They report dramatic increases of fruit and vegetable consumption when produce is made available in school meals. Their data also show that increasing availability of fruits and vegetables through salad bars sets up opportunities for children to have repeated exposures to new foods, which can affect their eating habits for a lifetime.

"I will never forget how skeptics in 1999 told me, 'Oh, you will never get rid of the Sloppy Joes.' But today you have to go visit Hooper Elementary School in South Central where 800 children, even the little kindergarteners, are grabbing the fruit and vegetables from the salad bar on their way to the hot lunch window," Slusser said. "Yes, it was a daunting task, but now there are more than 60 salad bars in Los Angeles Unified School District."

Cafeteria infrastructure

The Children's Fruit and Vegetable Act also includes \$100 million for overall cafeteria infrastructure improvements. Many cafeterias around the country are looking to move away from outside food contractors and toward scratch kitchens, but lack the funds to implement such a plan.

"The Recovery Act included \$100 million in grants for cafeteria equipment, but the Department of Education received more than \$650 million in requests for infrastructure improvements," Rep. Farr said. "Clearly there's an interest to improve the quality of meals we feed our children, but it will take a significant investment to get us there."

Farm to cafeteria

The legislation also provides competitive matching grants and technical assistance to schools to improve access to local foods. The bill directs \$10 million a year for five years toward these farm-to-school programs.

Legislative strategy

While the Children's Fruit and Vegetable Act has been introduced as a standalone bill, Rep. Farr has indicated he will actively advocate for its inclusion in next year's Child Nutrition Act reauthorization.

"Congress extended the Child Nutrition Act for one year, which gives us some breathing room to finish work on that bill," Rep. Farr said. "I strongly believe the initiatives included in this legislation are a perfect fit for the Child Nutrition Act. We're reaching a saturation point where parents, educators, administrators, policymakers, even children, want healthier meals for our kids. To get there, the first step is to put the foods in front of them."

Other support

A recent report titled "School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children" by the Institute of Medicine, the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences, states that increasing the amount and variety of vegetables and fruits in schools is one of the best ways to make school meals healthier. The group's recommendation's that schools increase their offering of fruits and vegetables are intended to bring school meals in line with dietary guidelines.

The full IOM study is available online here:

<http://www.iom.edu/en/Reports/2009/School-Meals-Building-Blocks-for-Healthy-Children.aspx>

Esperanza Zendejas, superintendent of California's Alisal Union School District, has introduced salad bars in all 11 of her elementary schools and reports significant increases in the number of children who eat fruits and vegetables as well as overall fruit and vegetable consumption.

"Our school district in many ways is educating an entire family about fresh fruits and vegetables," Zendejas said. "Having salad bars in our schools makes it easier to connect a lot more of the healthy eating habits, learning and instruction. The introduction of fresh fruits and vegetables to our youngest learners will become the foundation of lifelong healthy eating habits."

The legislation also has direct implications for California agriculture, especially the Salinas valley's \$4 billion fruit and vegetable industry. Rep. Farr played a key role in the drafting of last year's Farm Bill, including the \$1 billion increase in the USDA Snack Program and another \$1 billion in a variety of specialty crop research programs.

"Providing more fruits and vegetables in schools is a win-win for children and the fresh produce industry," said Lorri Koster, co-chairman of Mann Packing in Salinas. "It's exciting to be part of an industry that can provide a very real and needed benefit for millions of children across the country. With this legislation, both our kids and our nation's produce industry can grow stronger."

The full text of the bill is available here: <http://www.farr.house.gov/images/stories/Documents/fruitandveg.pdf>

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